NPS Form 10-900

OMB No. 10024-0018

(Oct. 1990)

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form* (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name Promise Land School

other names/site number Promise Land Community Center; DS.471

2. Location

street & number Promise Land Road, north of Reddon Crossing/Will G Road NA☐ not for publication

city or town Promise NA☐ vicinity

state Tennessee code TN county Dickson code 043 zip code NA

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this ☒ nomination ☐ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set for in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property ☒ meets ☐ does not meet the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant ☐ nationally ☐ statewide ☒ locally. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of certifying official/Title Date

Deputy State Historic Preservation Officer, Tennessee Historical Commission

State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property ☐ meets ☐ does not meet the National Register criteria. (☐ See Continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of certifying official/Title Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that the property is: Signature of the Keeper Date of Action

- ☐ entered in the National Register.
  - ☐ See continuation sheet
- ☐ determined eligible for the National Register.
  - ☐ See continuation sheet
- ☐ determined not eligible for the National Register.
- ☐ removed from the National Register.
- ☐ other, (explain:) _____

5. Classification

Ownership of Property
(Check as many boxes as apply)

- ☒ private
- ☐ public-local
- ☐ public-State
- ☐ public-Federal

Category of Property
(Check only one box)

- ☒ building(s)
- ☐ district
- ☐ site
- ☐ structure
- ☐ object

Number of Resources within Property
(Do not include previously listed resources in count.)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
1		buildings
		sites
1	1	structures
		objects
2	1	Total

Name of related multiple property listing
(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)

NA

Number of Contributing resources previously listed in the National Register

0

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions
(Enter categories from instructions)

EDUCATION: school

Current Functions
(Enter categories from instructions)

SOCIAL: meeting hall

7. Description

Architectural Classification
(Enter categories from instructions)

OTHER: gabled ell

Materials
(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation Concrete
walls Weatherboard
roof Metal
other Glass

Narrative Description
(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

See continuation sheets.

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria
(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- ☒ **A** Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- ☐ **B** Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- ☐ **C** Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- ☐ **D** Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, Information important in prehistory or history.

Areas of Significance
(Enter categories from instructions)

Settlement Patterns
Ethnic heritage: African American
Education
Social History

Period of Significance

1899-1957

Criteria Considerations NA
(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- ☐ **A** owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- ☐ **B** removed from its original location.
- ☐ **C** moved from its original location.
- ☐ **D** a cemetery.
- ☐ **E** a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- ☐ **F** a commemorative property
- ☐ **G** less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

Significant Dates

c. 1899, c. 1915, c. 1935

Significant Person
(Complete if Criterion B is marked)

N/A

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Architect/Builder

Unknown

Narrative Statement of Significance
(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography
(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

Previous documentation on file (NPS): N/A

- ☐ preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
- ☐ previously listed in the National Register
- ☐ Previously determined eligible by the National Register
- ☐ designated a National Historic Landmark
- ☐ recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # _____
- ☐ recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # _____

Primary location of additional data:

- ☐ State Historic Preservation Office
- ☐ Other State Agency
- ☐ Federal Agency
- ☐ Local Government
- ☒ University
- ☐ Other

Name of repository:
MTSU Center for Historic Preservation

Promise Land School
Name of Property

Dickson Co., TN
County and State

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property Less than 1 acre Charlotte 48 NE

UTM References
(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet.)

	Zone	Easting	Northing		Zone	Easting	Northing
1	16	470196	4007069	3			
2				4			

☐ See continuation sheet

Verbal Boundary Description
(Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

Boundary Justification
(Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Carroll Van West, Rachel Martin, and Elizabeth Moore
organization MTSU Center for Historic Preservation date September 26, 2006
street & number PO Box 80, MTSU telephone 615-898-2947
city or town Murfreesboro state TN zip code 37132

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

Continuation Sheets

Maps

A **USGS map** (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location

A **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

Photographs

Representative **black and white photographs** of the property.

Additional items
(Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items.)

Property Owner

(Complete this item at the request of SHPO or FPO.)
name Promise Land Community Center; Helen Hughes (contact person)
street & number 4326 Highway 48 N telephone 615-789-4892
city or town Charlotte state TN zip code 37036

7. NARRATIVE DESCRIPTION

Promise Land School is located on a half-acre lot along Promise Land Road, a narrow paved road in the unincorporated community of Promise (Land). The area is north of Charlotte (pop. 1,153 in 2005), the seat of Dickson County. The one-story, metal-roofed, gabled ell building faces east and lies about 100 yards south of the St. John Methodist Church, located on an adjacent parcel. The school building has large mature trees in its front yard; the land around it is open and retains a very high quality of rural view shed and setting. A contributing c. 1935 privy lies just southwest of the school and a non-contributing c. 1935 capped well sits at the northwest corner of the kitchen ell.

Promise Land School has three distinct building periods. The original one-room school building, c. 1899, is the front section of the eastern-facing portion of the building; added to the rear is a c. 1915 extension that gave the school additional classroom space, but maintained the one-room configuration of the building. Circa 1935, New Deal funds supported the construction of an ell-wing kitchen addition that was located at the northwest corner of the one-room school. At the same time, horizontal wood siding was installed and four-over-four, double-hung wood windows were placed on all three portions of the building. The vertical board siding original to the c. 1899 and c. 1915 portions is visible underneath the current horizontal siding. Although several windows were replaced c. 1985, the Promise Land Community Club has begun efforts to restore all windows to their c. 1935 appearance. The form of the building has undergone little change since the addition of the kitchen wing c. 1935. The building has a concrete block foundation and a raised-seam metal roof.

The east facade of the c. 1899 part of the school has a single central bay with a single leaf wood door serving as the school entrance. Above the doorway is a c. 1985 metal shed roof, supported by two wood brackets. A wood handicap access ramp, c. 2000, extends from the entrance door. Projecting to the north is the east elevation of the c. 1935 kitchen addition. This kitchen elevation has four symmetrical wood windows that are slightly shorter than their original openings; of those four, the southernmost is a one-over-four, double-hung sash window and the other three are c. 1985 one-over-one, double-hung sash windows. The original windows were replaced with these shortened windows c. 1985.

The north elevation contains the c. 1899 school building and the c. 1935 kitchen addition. Two c. 1935 four-over-four, double-hung wood sash windows characterize the 1899 section. Both windows are topped with simple ornamental lintels. The north elevation of the kitchen addition has a single nine-over-nine, double-hung wood sash window on its east end and a wood single leaf door with a wood screen door on the west end. A stoop of five concrete steps leads to the door. The gable field has vertical board siding.

The west elevation of the kitchen addition is a solid weatherboard wall. This elevation also contains the c. 1915 classroom extension. The c. 1915 section was originally covered in vertical board siding that is still visible underneath the current siding. With the addition of the kitchen wing c. 1935, horizontal siding was installed over all three portions of the building. This gable end section contains a single symmetrical wood, six-over-six, double-hung sash window.

The south elevation is a mix of window and door treatments, a reflection of its distinct c. 1899 and c. 1915 building periods. At the southwest corner is a wood door, with wood screen door, that dates c. 1915. It is covered by an asphalt shingle shed roof, supported by wood brackets, that was installed c. 1985. Just to

the east of the center of the elevation is a c. 1985 one-over-one, double-hung wood window, which is part of the c. 1899 building. Another c. 1985 window is at the east end of the elevation.

The interior of the school retains its integrity to the mid-twentieth century. A linoleum floor and a ceiling fan were installed c. 1985; otherwise the original wood board walls, the board ceiling, and even a blackboard remain untouched. A break between the c. 1899 and c. 1915 sections is visible on the interior of the building. A seam is evident in the ceiling and there are distinct differences in material between the two sections. One visible piece of evidence of the different dates of the rooms is that the c. 1899 section has beaded-board ceilings, while the c. 1915 section contains plain boards.

The kitchen wing has more recent appliances, but otherwise its materials and finishes are original to c. 1935. Its floors are linoleum and its walls and ceiling are board.

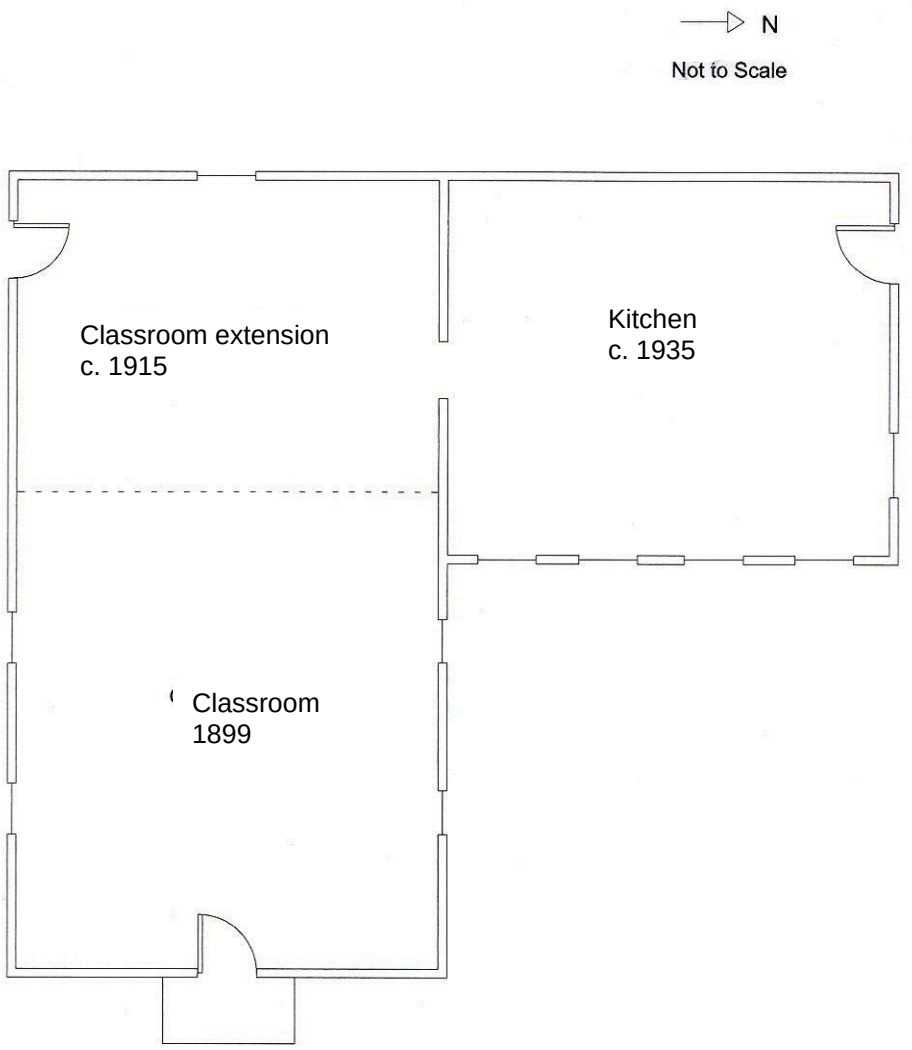
To the southwest of the school is a metal shed roof, board-and-batten box construction privy, installed c. 1935. This building contributes to the nomination. (C)

At the northwest corner of the kitchen ell is a c. 1935 poured-concrete well capped with a c. 1985 metal cover. (NC)

Promise Land School exhibits a strong degree of integrity in setting, workmanship, association, design, and overall exterior and interior appearance. It is an excellent representation of a rural African American school and its location and proximity to the St. John Methodist Church illustrates the historic relationship between churches and schools in rural African American neighborhoods. The school property continues to serve as a historical landmark in the Promise Land community.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet



Promise Land School/Community Center

8. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Promise Land School, located on Promise Land Road north of Charlotte, Dickson County, Tennessee, is being nominated to the National Register under criterion A for local significance in African American heritage as it relates to settlement patterns, education, and social history. First settled by freedmen in the Reconstruction era, the community of Promise Land sheltered its residents from the Jim Crow South, offering them protection from the strife and bigotry surrounding them. By 1899-1900 when the nominated school was built, the African American settlement was a thriving community composed of the school, churches, stores, and numerous residences. The extant school building stands as a representation of the importance of education to this early community and its evolution throughout the social and racial struggles of the first half of the twentieth century. Today the school is one of only two older buildings that remain to represent the settlement and development of this important community in Dickson County.

Historical Background

Ancestors of the founders of Promise Land were brought to Dickson County early in the county's settlement as slave labor for farms and for the iron works at Cumberland Furnace (NR 9/28/88), a major antebellum iron operation in Dickson County. Ironmaster Montgomery Bell, who began his operations in 1804, became one of the South's major users of industrial slavery. In 1825, Bell sold his property to Anthony Vanleer who continued to operate the iron plantation, heavily dependent on slave labor, through the initial years of the Civil War. With Emancipation, African Americans in Dickson County left the region in droves, many finding new opportunities in urban areas such as Nashville. The founders of Promise Land, however, chose to stay. They chose Promise Land's location because it was available and affordable, certainly, but the village was also central to the neighboring mostly white communities where they could work. The earlier history and persistence of industrial work in Dickson County meant that African Americans here had different opportunities than most of the South because the blacks had skills and experience as industrial workers.

Settlement Patterns of the Jim Crow Era

Soon after the end of the war, c. 1870, the Bowen, Redden, and Vanleer African American families purchased one thousand acres in the vicinity of Promise Land. When brothers Arch and John Nesbitt left the nearby community of Vanleer, in 1880 or 1881, they used their war pensions to purchase a plot of land less than one mile away from these initial purchases of c. 1870. Though the origin of the community's name is unknown, one possibility is that the families had finally claimed the land the federal government had promised them; another is that the location was viewed as one of more promise than the initial settlement of c. 1870.[1]

In 1881, what had been a hamlet of families began to organize as a community when the Nesbitt brothers purchased land for a church and school, forming Promise Land's new heart. Their land, later deeded to the respective institutions, contains the nominated school building and the St. John Methodist Church, the only

[1] Serina K. Gilbert, "From the Fiery Furnace to the Promise Land," 18-19; Sokoto Natambu Fulani, "The Ethos of Promise Land: A Historiography Perspective," II.

two remaining community buildings of Promise Land. By 1900, the families had founded a Baptist church, a Methodist church, and an African Methodist Episcopal Church. The Mount Olive Missionary Baptist and Mount Olive African Methodist Episcopal (AME) congregations shared their worship space, so there were only two church buildings.[2] Following a conflict among members of the local AME congregation, dissidents created St. John Methodist Church c. 1900. On September 1, 1902, John and Ellen Nesbitt deeded land on which St. John Methodist Church stands over to the trustees of the church. The original church building was constructed c. 1900, but was rebuilt in 1941 in the same location after the original building was destroyed by fire. The 1941 St. John Methodist Church is still standing, but the AME/Baptist Church building that was once located about a quarter of a mile south of the St. John building is no longer extant. The c. 1899 Promise Land School was constructed on the adjacent lot south of the St. John Methodist Church.

During the first part of the twentieth century, the area included approximately 1,000 acres on which these institutions, several stores, and about fifty homes were located. None of the stores or residences remain, but they once contributed to an active community. Some of the Nesbitts ran an establishment across the street from the Methodist church, and John Nesbitt operated another store near the school and the Baptist church. A third shop owned by Boyd Hooper sat further down Promise Land Road.[3] Though serious shopping had to be done in Charlotte, these markets provided basic groceries and other supplies for the families.[4]

The areas surrounding Promise Land offered the settlers jobs as both industrial workers and farmers. Until the iron furnaces closed in 1936, community members continued to work in them, but as the nineteenth century turned into the early twentieth century, many residents left the iron works to cultivate their own land, raising dark-fired tobacco as their cash crop, and then devoting the remaining acreage to other vegetables and livestock. This northern section of Dickson County is geographically and culturally within the southern tip of the dark-fired tobacco culture that stretched into central Kentucky and, in Tennessee, was centered in the adjacent counties of Montgomery, Cheatham, and Robertson. Children raised by the dark-fired tobacco farmers still remember the astounding amount of work that went into the crop. "It's very labor intensive from beginning to the end," John Primm explained

> Nowadays, you know, they go to the market and they get the plants already a certain size, but we had to grow, you know, the plants from seedlings in what they call a plant bed. Well, what you have to do is actually get fertile ground, and you have to plant the seed. You actually burn it and put ashes to make it more fertile, and the ash is what the plants really thrive on, and they grew. Once they get up to a certain size, then they were ready to be planted in the field. …Then you had to, before they came out with the chemical that kills the little things what they call suckers that come up

[2] Gilbert, "From the Fiery Furnace to the Promise Land," 19-20.

[3] (Susie) Bernice (Edmondson) Heard, interview by Rachel L. Martin, 10 May 2006, Promise Land, TN, CD recording, Middle Tennessee State University Center for Historic Preservation, Murfreesboro, TN; Helen Hughes, interview by Rachel L. Martin, 10 May 2006, Promise Land, TN, CD recording, MTSU Center for Historic Preservation, Murfreesboro, TN.

[4] Interview with Ruffus Robertson.

> between the leaves, you had to physically break those off by hand. … But it was very labor intense. I mean, as far as you could see, just rows of tobacco. That's the one reason I don't smoke today: it was just too much work. … Then the actually harvesting, putting in the barn and then build a fire and keep the fire constantly being burning or smoking. You couldn't really burn but it would be smoking. And that could never go out. You had to continuously keep that going. And the barn was so high, and then you had to go, unfortunately, I was the smallest, I had to go, I was the smallest so I had to go all the way to the top, you know, and handle every plant. You know, when tobacco's on these sticks, you put like six on a sticks hanging up into the barn and, good God, I get goose bumps just talking about it.[5]

The areas surrounding the school, churches, and stores became gathering places for Promise Land residents, particularly the children. Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, they adopted the communal areas around the school and churches for their recreation, especially during the school year. The girls used the space between the school and the Methodist church for hopscotch, jump rope and Little Sally Walker (rhyme/rhyming game). Meanwhile the boys claimed the opposite side of the school for basketball and other games. Across the street there was a community park with a seesaw and a tire swing [not extant].[6] Because all the children lived near each other, parents allowed them to run between houses. Heard remembered meeting her two closest friends Ethel Pearl Robertson and Mary Lee Robertson. Most days "we would go up and down the road all day long. I would go to Mary Lee's house, stay maybe fifteen or twenty minutes, wasn't long before we'd come back to my house, stay a while, go right back to her house. We just kept the road hot going from house to house. But it was a lot of fun."[7]

Promise Land is believed to have been Dickson County's largest African American community during the first decades of the twentieth century and provided shelter from the Jim Crow South. Though the ratio of blacks to whites in Dickson County was lower than the national average, in Promise Land the freedmen were the only residents, creating a world they could control. For some, this isolation was so complete, they claimed to have ignored the world outside, and some of the descendents remembered their confusion when they left the village for high school. When Ruffus Robertson joined all the African American students from across the county at Hampton High School in Dickson, he wondered "why the school was so small. … In my graduating class, it was only twenty-one, and some classes were smaller than that. … I've seen classes with six and seven in the graduating class. I didn't really realize that it was only that many blacks in the county."[8]

The community of Promise Land thrived in the first decades of the twentieth century, the school seeing its largest enrollment in 1905. The population remained fairly stable for the next two decades, but began a

[5] John Primm, interview by Rachel L. Martin, 10 May 2006, Promise Land, TN, CD recording, MTSU Center for Historic Preservation, Murfreesboro, TN.

[6] Interview with Ruffus Robertson.

[7] Interview with Bernice Heard.

[8] Ruffus Robertson, interview by Rachel L. Martin, 10 May 2006, Promise Land, TN, CD recording, Middle Tennessee State University Center for Historic Preservation, Murfreesboro, TN.

slow decline in the 1920s as a result of urban migration. The closing of the iron furnaces in 1936 led to significant declines in population in the next few decades.

Education Significance

Parents in Promise Land stressed education, and records show that this emphasis began as soon as the community was founded c. 1880 and eventually led to the school's construction and expansion over the years. The reason for this value was simple: as slaves, most of the founders of Promise Land had never learned to read and write because white legislators had made their schooling illegal. By denying African Americans an education, European Americans established a paternalistic society in which slaves and freedmen depended on others to help them navigate the economic and social systems around them.[9] For many freedmen, education represented the key to escaping a history of repression, protested their enslavement and gave them true freedom from their masters.[10] Even several generations later, this desire for learning remained strong. For instance, though John Primm's father had only finished the third grade, "he wanted us, he was going to make sure that we all at least finished high school and had the opportunity to go to college if we wanted to, you know. I mean, he was just a stickler for that." Primm clearly remembers "the last whipping I got from him, it was just right over there. I had skipped school. I was a senior. I thought I got away, and my little cousin, … she told. …I was sitting there on the porch, and Stephanie said, 'He didn't go to school today.' And I said, 'What you gotta tell that for,' you know. And … my dad just kind of laughed, but when I got home, man, he tore my tale up. And I'm a senior. He whupped my butt. He said, 'You don't be skipping school.'"[11]

Recognizing the symbolic and economic importance of education, many whites fought against black schools. Reconstruction era educational reformers fought "a weary, burdened public [that] was in no mood—and had scant means—to burden itself with taxes for common schools."[12] Education advocates offered segregation as an alternative that placated whites while helping blacks, making it "an improvement rather than a setback in the status of blacks."[13] Tennessee's School Law of 1873, originally drafted by the State Teachers' Association, mandated that all children between six and eighteen have access to free education, established a permanent school fund on which the state had to pay a yearly interest, and added both a poll tax on every male citizen and a property tax. It also reinstituted the positions of county and state

[9] John Hardin Best, "Education in the forming of the American South," *History of Education Quarterly* 36 (Spring, 1996): 40-41, http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0018-2680%28199621%2936%3AEITFOT%3E2.0.CO%3B2-B (accessed May 16, 2006).

[10] Vincent P. Franklin, "In Pursuit of Freedom: The Educational Activities of Black Social Organizations in Philadelphia, 1900-1930," *New Perspectives on Black Educational History* (Boston: G.K. Hall and Company, 1978), 113-14.

[11] Interview with John Primm.

[12] Wilma Dykeman, *Tennessee: A Bicentennial History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1975), 165-66.

[13] Howard N. Rabinowitz, *First New South*, The American History Series (Arlington Heights, IL: Harlan Davidson, Inc, 1992), 134-35.

superintendents.[14] Despite the law's promises, the state debt and the Panic of 1873 hindered payments while county superintendents found it hard to raise enough money to get their systems off the ground. In 1875, fewer than sixty thousand students had enrolled in public schools, and as late as 1880 the state superintendent described his department as a "'disaster and [had] apprehensions of impoverishment.'"[15] Frustrated by the slow course of change, "in hundreds of local communities [across Tennessee], Negro citizens pooled their meager resources to furnish school buildings, pay teachers and buy books and clothes," which is exactly what happened in Promise Land.[16]

Members of the Promise Land Community erected the first school in the 1880s. It was about 300 yards north of the present school building. When fire destroyed the original building in the 1890s, the community worked together to rebuild it. That structure, erected in 1899, is the earliest portion of the one still standing today.[17] During that same year, on July 5, 1899, John Nesbitt and his wife deeded the half-acre school lot to "H.G. Castleman, R. Johnson, and D.J. Matlock, school directors and their successors in office…to hold in trust forever as public school property for the education of persons of color."[18] This deed illustrates the importance of education to the community of Promise Land. Both buildings, the 1880s and the 1899 structures, were built entirely by the community. In addition, members of the community rather than the county provided the class materials and instruction during the early years of the school.[19]

White politicians and educational leaders had assumed that black schools would use white teachers, but when black community leaders across the South and in Promise Land realized that segregation was not a transitional arrangement but the product of educational reforms, they urged for even greater segregation than white officials had originally intended. Black children, they asserted, needed African American instructors as role models, students who finished their schooling needed jobs as teachers and they did not want unqualified white teachers to use their schools as a default. The leaders of Promise Land agreed with this assertion and looked to members of the community as well as to others from Dickson County and the surrounding areas to teach their children. Early teachers from Promise Land who volunteered their time and expertise included Mr. Rufus Robertson, Mrs. Emma Hutton Edmondson, Miss Ella Robertson, Mr.

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[14] William Robertson Garrett and Albert Virgil Goodpasture, *History of Tennessee: Its People and Institutions* (Nashville, TN: The Brandon Company, 1900), 298; Robert H. White, *Tennessee: Its Growth and Progress*, (Nashville, TN: Robert H. White, 1947), 380.

[15] Robert E. Corlew, *Tennessee: A Short History, Incorporating Revisions Developed by the Late Stanley J. Folmsbee and the Late Enoch Mitchell* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1981), 396-97.

[16] Meyer Weinberg, *A Chance to Learn: The History of Race and Education in the United States* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 51; Earle H. West, *The Black American and Education* (Columbus, OH: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Company, 1972), 60.

[17] Serina K. Gilbert, "Promise Land School," 23; Interview with Ruffus Robertson.

[18] Dickson County Deed Book 38, 122-123.

[19] Essie V. Gilbert, "History of Promise Land School," *The Promise Land Community Club Presents Reunion 2005: Souvenir Program Material.* N.P.: 2005, 32.

Ernest Nesbitt, Rev. Hutchitson from Mt. Olive AME Church, and Mrs. Dee Cunningham Langford. Teachers from outside of the community, including those from Clarksville or Nashville, would board with families in Promise Land during their stay. The turnover rate of teachers at Promise Land was high, and a few times in the early years the school even went without a teacher for several months. As a contrast, assistant teachers were provided during some years to help with the large number of students. The last teacher, Miss Ollie Huddleston of Dickson, came to Promise Land in 1945 and, except for 1950 when she was assigned to another county school, stayed until the school closed in 1957.[20]

Following the end of Reconstruction as southern politics changed and African American gains dwindled, black educators engaged in an uphill battle to provide adequate opportunities for their students.[21] Promise Land School demonstrated what determined teachers could accomplish, and those raised in the community still praise the high level of instruction they received. While many African Americans in the South could not go to high school, Ruffus Robertson marveled over how many of the graduates not only finished high school but went on to college, and Bernice Heard, who completed a graduate degree in education, remembered that Ollie Huddleston, the last teacher at the school, "made sure we [all] learned to read. I've always been proud of that."[22]

Children in grades one through eight attended Promise Land School until 1956 when grades seven and eight moved to Hampton High School in Dickson. Students in grades one through six remained at Promise Land for one additional year until the Dickson County school system was integrated in 1957. In addition to the basic courses of English, math, reading, and writing, students at Promise Land received instruction in conservation, Tennessee history, and etiquette. In these classes, students learned about their own community and learned skills such as how to properly answer a telephone and order at a restaurant. They were also involved in extra-curricular activities, most notably the 4-H Club, where children would stay after school to learn agricultural, domestic, and vocational skills. Girls were taught culinary skills while boys took courses in farming, trade, and industry.[23]

During the early to mid-twentieth century there were as many as sixteen African American schools in Dickson County and special events at many of these schools provided Promise Land students an opportunity to interact with other children and communities. One such event was the annual field day at Hampton High School in Dickson. In April of each year, students from the African American schools across the county gathered for a day at Hampton to compete in events such as spelling bees, essay contests, and relay events. The winners of each activity were awarded blue ribbons and trophies. In addition to these contests, Promise Land students also entered into a yearly countywide essay contest for both black and

[20] Essie V. Gilbert, 32-33.

[21] Michael Dennis, "Schooling Along the Color Line, Progressives and the Education of Blacks in the New South," *The Journal of Negro Education* 67 (Spring, 1998): 143, http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0022-2984%28199821%2967%3A23C142%3ASATCLP%3E2.0.CO%3B2-L (accessed May 16, 2006); Knox, "Negro Separate School," 269, 274.

[22] Fulani, "Ethos of Promise Land," II; interview with Bernice Heard; interview with Ruffus Robertson.

[23] Serina K. Gilbert, phone interview by Elizabeth H. Moore, 4 Dec 2006.

white children. Special events at Promise Land School included school plays and Christmas programs.[24] These extracurricular activities and special events allowed Promise Land students to engage with other students and community members around the county. Along with their coursework, these opportunities prepared Promise Land students to continue on to high school, college, and a career.

The school building operated as a one-room school throughout its history. The highest enrollment at the school occurred during the turn of the twentieth century, and numbers peaked in 1905 at ninety-three students. During these crowded years, the one-room building was too small to house all the pupils, so the children divided by grade and age. Sometimes the younger children remained in the school while the older students went to Mt. Olive Baptist Church for their lessons; other semesters one group came to classes in the morning while the others came after lunch.[25]

Although the highest enrollment of the school occurred about a decade earlier, an extension to the building was added c. 1915 to provide more space to the crowded classroom. This addition was placed on the rear of the original portion of the building and extended toward the west, creating a long rectangular footprint.

A major improvement to school services came c. 1935, when the Works Progress Administration (WPA) worked with the local board of education and the African American community to build a cafeteria and kitchen wing to the school. The “hot lunch” program was an important WPA program in Tennessee and providing industrial education (that is, domestic training for African American girls) was important to many white education officials.

Social History Associations

For over a century, Promise Land School and the adjacent St. John Methodist Church have been vibrant community centers. They have provided a venue for important community events such as performances by the Promise Land Singers and the annual homecoming days. Members of the three churches of Promise Land often visited the other congregations, particularly on special occasions. Heard reported that she “went to all of the churches. I was a Methodist because my parents were Methodists, but we went to every church in the community and not only in this community but surrounding communities. A lot of people thought we were AME because we were always at the AME church. No matter what they were doing, even at their conference, we would go.”[26] The most popular event held at the St. John’s Church in the 1950s was the all-night singing organized by Theo Edmondson, father of Bernice Heard and Helen Hughes. Though the concerts attracted outsiders of both races, none of the Promise Land residents recall any racial hostility during the performances. In fact, Hughes recalled two white men who came because they had befriended her father and enjoyed singing with him. Because the whites came to the blacks, there was no segregation those nights; instead, “it was just as many people standing outside as inside trying, you know, everybody could get in the church. So it was just all around, people standing all around trying to hear the singing.” The most popular request was to hear Edmondson sing “Peace in the Valley,” though many also wanted to hear

[24] Ibid.

[25] Serina K. Gilbert, “Promise Land School,” 23; Interview with Ruffus Robertson.

[26] Interview with Bernice Heard.

him "'Tis the Old Ship of Zion." So many audience members enjoyed hearing Heard and other girls her age sing "Touch Me, Lord Jesus" that Edmondson formed the Promise Land Singers, a group of young women from the village that Heard accompanied as they toured Middle Tennessee singing in the mid-twentieth century. They even had a regular gospel radio program on WVOL Radio in Nashville.[27] The Promise Land singers performed until 1957 when Edmondson passed away, but the tradition of having all-night singings during the month of May continues today.

The annual homecoming days so important to the community of Promise Land began in the 1940s as a Sunday gathering for residents and visitors. Well attended by visiting relatives who returned for the occasion, the event also brought outsiders from Dickson County and Nashville. Heard remembered that the Reverend Jesse Bowen, a descendent of Promise Land who took a church in Nolensville, brought his congregation to the celebration "in a big bus, a big, oh, we thought we was somebody to see a big bus come through."[28] The homecoming event continued through the twentieth century, and in 2000 became a weekend festival that attracts 200-300 current and former community members to Promise Land. The school, church, and open space in between are the focal point of these events.

Throughout the twentieth century, the families also used the school as a gathering location, assembling for Halloween, Christmas, and Easter plays as well as the end of year ceremonies. In addition, they used the grounds for old-time suppers featuring Betty Cunningham's barbecued chicken sandwiches and homemade ice cream.[29] The Vanleers also hosted community picnics there, and on some summer Saturday nights, John Wesley Edmondson and Emmit Vanleer organized socials outside the building that they lit by a string of bulbs stretched around the space. At these events, the fare sold at the concession stands raised money for community and private causes.[30]

Post-World War II Settlement Patterns and Education

Although the population had been slowing declining since the 1920s, post-World War II urban migration had a significant impact on the community of Promise Land. According to the Survey of Economic Opportunity, by 1967 blacks from the rural South had scattered across the nation: two million lived in urban areas, half in the South and half outside it. Though these migrants had less education than those raised in urban areas, they were no more likely to be in poverty than African American urban non-migrants.[31] Greater employment opportunities in urban areas led many Promise Land residents to leave their homes in the Post-World War II period.

[27] Interview with Bernice Heard; interview with Helen Hughes; interview with Ruffus Robertson.

[28] Fulani, "Ethos of Promise Land," III; interview with Bernice Heard.

[29] Interview with Bernice Heard; interview with Helen Hughes; interview with John Primm; interview with Ruffus Robertson.

[30] Fulani, "Ethos of Promise Land," IV.

[31] Anne S. Lee and Gladys K. Bowles, "Policy Implications of the Movement of Blacks out of the Rural South," *Phylon* 35 (Fall, 1974): 333-36, http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0031-8906%28197433%2935%3A33C332%3APIOTMO%3E2.0.CO%3B2-H (accessed March 15, 2005).

While life in Promise Land was full of freedom, it was also much more rustic. For instance, John Primm's family did not get an indoor toilet until they built a new home in the late 1960s.[32] As a result, while the children born in Promise Land remember it as an idyllic place to grow up, many parents felt they had to leave. Individuals and families left Promise Land for Columbus, Ohio; Indianapolis, Indiana; Chicago, Illinois; Buffalo, New York; and Detroit, Michigan. There, some found jobs in automobile factories; others went to work at steel mills. When they returned to Promise Land for visits, they showed off the perks of city life: new cars, familiarity of popular culture, nice clothing. Sukoto Fulani remembered:

> Sure enough, just as soon as the warm weather came in March and April of the year 1951, Uncle Babe came back to Promise Land from Columbus, Ohio. He was being driven about in absolutely the largest automobile I'd ever seen. (A green 1951 Cadillac with fish tails) He assured daddy [sic] that he was not holding it against him to leave the land and homestead for the city. By the time of school vacations of that same year, our cousins, the Calvin and Christine (Jones) Roberson children, were talking about the fact that not only was their daddy going to leave Promise Land; but the entire family was too. … Daddy simply could not take the pressure any longer, so he announced that he would be leaving for Columbus, Ohio [,] the following year. In the spring of 1952, daddy [sic] and Bubber left the rest of the family with Mamma Minnie, Mama's mother. … We did not put in many vegetables for winter canning, as Daddy assured us that he would be sending money back to buy groceries; and anyway he was going to move us all up to Ohio with him just as soon as possible.[33]

As families moved, school enrollment dwindled; and, at some points during the 1940s and 1950s, fewer than thirty students enrolled in classes. Across the county, African American schools began to close due to school consolidation and low enrollment; and by the early 1950s, less than ten African American schools remained.[34] Beginning in 1956, the seventh and eighth graders from Promise Land went to Dickson for classes, and in the spring of 1957, the county board of education closed the community's school, consolidating the Promise Land School with Cedar Grove Elementary in Charlotte.[35] Even after the end of classes, the school remained a center of community life. During the annual homecomings hosted by the different churches, the congregations served meals in the building. Over time, residents remade the building into a community center, which it still is today.

At the same time the school enrollment was decreasing, the churches began to lose members, causing two of them to close. The Baptist and AME congregations never separated but both continued to use Mt. Olive's building (not extant). As families began moving away, numbers in these congregations fell so low

[32] Interview with John Primm.

[33] Fulani, "Ethos of Promise Land," II.

[34] Serina K. Gilbert, research compiled in draft form for a publication related to African American education in Dickson County.

[35] Serina K. Gilbert, ""From Fiery Furnace to the Promise Land," 20; Serina K. Gilbert, "Promise Land School," 23; interview with John Primm; interview with Ruffus Robertson.

that the Mt. Olive Baptist Church dissolved in the 1950s and the AME Church closed about a decade later due to lack of members. The building remained vacant and was torn down in the mid-1970s.[36]

Since the school closed in 1957, the building has been used for various purposes of the community. It has served as a venue for Sunday school classes, community meetings, and social gatherings. The building is currently owned by the Promise Land Community Club and is used as a community center. Gathered from Promise Land residents, the community center holds a collection of historic photographs and documents telling the story of this important community. In addition to it general use as a gathering place, the community center is the heart of the annual homecoming tradition of Promise Land, which occurs the first weekend of June each year and draws visitors from around the nation and even the world as descendents have taken jobs in both Germany and Japan. Through these occasions, many of the residents who had moved away from the village have begun to reinvest in its life, some by coming back for the annual visits and others by restoring their families' properties in preparation of a return. Thus, after several decades of negligence, the community has been revitalized by becoming the locus from which networks of kinship spread.

[36] Fulani, "Ethos of Promise Land," IV.

9. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

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10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

Verbal Boundary Description and Justification

Promise Land School is shown on Dickson County tax map 47 as parcel 28.01. The nominated boundaries represent the current legal boundaries of the extant historic property associated with the site. The map scale of 1" = 400' is the only scale map available for rural areas of the state.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

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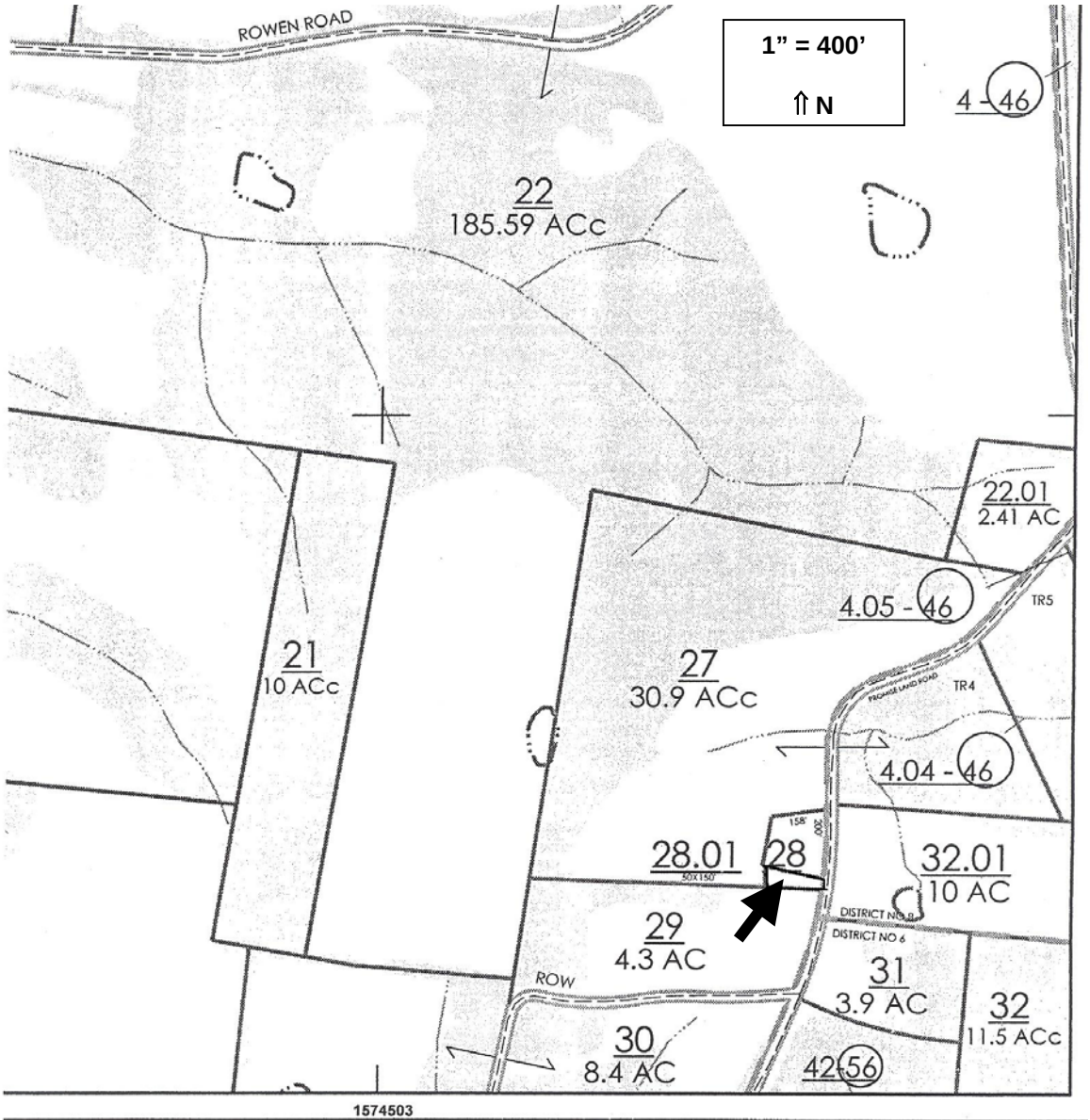
Promise Land School
Dickson Co., TN



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United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

PHOTOGRAPHS

Photographs by:	Elizabeth Moore MTSU Center for Historic Preservation
Date:	May 2006
Negatives/digital images:	Tennessee Historical Commission Nashville, Tennessee

Promise Land School and Privy, facing west.
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Promise Land School, east façade, facing west.
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Promise Land School, east façade and north elevation, facing southwest.
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Promise Land School, north elevation, facing south.
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Promise Land School, north and west elevations, facing southeast.
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Promise Land School, west elevation, facing east.
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Promise Land School, south elevation, facing north.
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Promise Land School, interior, facing southeast.
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Promise Land School, interior, facing east-southeast.
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Promise Land School, interior, facing east.
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Promise Land School, interior, facing west.
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Promise Land School, interior, facing north-northwest.
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Promise Land School, kitchen, facing north.
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Promise Land School, kitchen, facing north
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Promise Land School, kitchen, facing east-northeast.
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Promise Land School, performance platform, and St. John Methodist Church, facing north.
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Privy, facing southwest.
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Promise Land Community, facing southwest.
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